

**Ecumenism, Christology, and Ethnicity:
The 26th Letter of Patriarch Timothy of the Church of the East
(Translation and Commentary)**

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6/24/2021

Abstract

The illustrious Patriarch of the Church of the East in the late 8th Century, Timothy I, is well-known for his debate on the Christian Faith with the Islamic Caliph of Baghdad, Al Mahdi. His letters have received comparatively little attention. This essay presents the first English translation of his 26th Letter along with commentary. This Letter addresses controversial themes such as ecumenism, Christological controversies (including the much-debated term “qnoma”), the proper ordering of the ancient Christian Patriarchates, and the ethnic designation of members of the Church of the East.

Introduction

This letter, numbered the twenty-sixth,¹ of the illustrious Patriarch of the Church of the East, Timothy I (from the years 780-823 AD), is significant for several reasons. Patriarch Timothy is famous already, among other reasons, for his debate with the Muslim Caliph Al Mahdi around the year 781 AD,² in the newly-founded city of Baghdad, and for his (somewhat unclear) role in the translation movement of Greek texts into Aramaic/Syriac³ and then into Arabic.⁴

One of the reasons this particular letter (or rather fragment, since the manuscript is incomplete) is of interest is indeed that, like the debate mentioned above, it showcases what we might call “interreligious dialogue.” The first section of the letter describes the Christian Faith as a bright light, but one which strikes different eyes differently. Not that the Faith itself is varying, but rather that some eyes are capable of receiving it only in part. The Faith itself is a priceless pearl, while those who receive it are often like less-than precious substances. Timothy speaks here not only of individuals, but of the varying cultures into which the Christian Faith has been received, according to their own manners and customs. Commonalities between “us” and “the Melkites and Syrians” include the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, the priesthood, “worship to the Cross and the East,” the Scriptures, and the basic faith stated in the Creed, especially the Trinity and the Incarnation.

The latter point, however, is one of contention in its details. While there is agreement about the fact of the Incarnation, the “manner” of the Union between the human and Divine natures in Christ is a point of disagreement. For Timothy, the Scriptures and nature itself affirm a unity of will and of Person

¹ Critical edition by Oscar Braun, *Timothei Patriarchae I, Epistulae I*, CSCO 74, Scriptores Syri 30 (Louvain: Peeters, 1953), 142-150. Special thanks to Martin Heimgartner for sharing the draft of his forthcoming new critical edition.

² Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 352; Clint Hackenburg gives other possibilities, in *An Arabic-to-English Translation of the Religious Debate between the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I and the Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi* (M.A. Thesis: Ohio State University, 2009), 11-12.

³ Though the term “Syriac” is often used by scholars to designate the particular dialect of Edessa, I prefer using the term of the language itself, Aramaic. For an account of the translation movement see Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), especially 61-68. Also Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 106-125. More specifically to Timothy, see Sebastian P. Brock, “Two Letters of the Patriarch Timothy from the Late Eighth Century on Translations from Greek,” in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 9 (1999): 233-246.

⁴ Timothy’s search for a good Greek manuscript of the *Topics* is well described by John Watt, “Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and Political Thought in the Christian Orient and in al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes,” in Vasileios Syros, ed., *Well Begun is Only Half Done: Tracing Aristotle’s Political Ideas in Medieval Arabic, Syriac, Byzantine, and Jewish Sources* (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2011), 27-28.

(*Parsopa*), described as “in-dwelling,” not one of nature (*kyana*) or *qnoma*. The word *qnoma* is infamously difficult to interpret (and hence left untranslated below), but it indicates that which is three in the Trinity and two in Christ. It is neither “nature” abstractly speaking (such as “divinity” or “humanity”), nor “person” in any relational sense, but rather expresses a concrete manifestation of a nature as opposed to nature abstractly speaking. Christ is *this* man, not humanity abstractly; he is the *Son* of God, not Divinity abstractly (or generally). “Individuality” might be an approximate translation. The result of this, for Timothy, is a rejection of the *communicatio idiomatum*, which amounts to either blasphemy or empty talk (which would have been an important point in any debate with Islamic theologians during his time). On the other hand, Timothy, like the tradition he represents, has no qualms referring to Christ in the flesh as “God above all” later in the letter.

In discussing other religions, Timothy is able to combine clarity and charity with great skill, as he did in the text of his *Debate* with Al-Mahdi. The old and “new Jews” (apparently his name for Muslims) profess one God but reject the Trinity; the Manichees and Marcionites profess, in addition to a good God, an evil one. Timothy makes it a point to affirm that “we know, together and one and the same, the Just One, the Good One, and the Maker. Likewise, they treat and confess these things like we do, and we accept them and praise together.” On the other hand, when we move beyond generalities, confusions enter the picture, and it is our duty to renounce them.

The final extant section of the letter has to do with the relative primacy of the five Patriarchal Sees of the Church, and it is here that what we would call nationality or ethnicity comes into the picture. He speaks here only of his own See of the Church of the East properly speaking, since he has already made a strong distinction between his tradition and that of the Melkites and “Syrians” earlier.⁵ Timothy makes it a point to limit the number of Sees to five, using Scripture as his basis. The spring in Eden added to the four rivers flowing from it equal five; the four Gospel writers added to St. Paul make five; the Pentateuch is made up of five books.

⁵ This would have serious implications if “Syrian” was intended to mean “Assyrian” at the time of Timothy, but this etymology must have already been lost to history. Indeed, such implications, and therefore their historical etymology, are contradicted by Timothy’s later reference to Nimrod. Syrian and Assyrian meant different things by his time; otherwise, he is simply denying any implication of Assyrian identity and claiming that for the Antiochian Church alone.

Which of the five Sees (for him, presumably Babylon, Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople) is “first,” however, is more difficult to discern (though he certainly has no hesitation giving Rome the second place after Babylon). His overall claim is that Christ in the flesh is “from us,” since Christ is the Son David, who is the son of Abraham, who is “from us, the sons of the East.” Though he never uses the name Chaldean explicitly, the reference to Abraham who is called a Chaldean in several Scriptural verses, is significant. Similarly, the original spring mentioned in Genesis is that of Eden, with the four rivers springing from it moving outward. This, Timothy claims, shows the primacy of his See symbolically. He claims as his own also the Magi who were the first to worship Christ (numbering them at twelve, and dating the time of their visit to Christ’s third year), and concludes that their temporal primacy as worshippers of Christ implies the natural priority of his See over others. Finally, he names Nimrod, who is associated with Akkad, Assyria, and Nineveh (though again, these particular national names are never used).

Translation

To him forgiven by God, our brother Maranzkha, bishop of Nineveh,
Timothy, the little servant of our Lord, greeting you, forgiven, in the love of our Lord.

<The General Pattern: Universal Faith, Differing Concrete Applications>

Our Christian Faith is pure gold and a pearl of great price,⁶ O forgiven of God, that whose head and Perfecter is Jesus Christ.⁷ And so a pure lamp⁸ diffuses the brightness of its rays in a place and toward people, and enlightens each man simply and lawfully, but in each place and toward different peoples differently – for example, toward a thing placed under a bed or under a peck. So it is not toward everyone and not simply that it gives the rays of its splendor and radiance. Thus this sensible sun has one and the same power of enlightening, but the power of receiving its light is not one and the same, but determined by the quantity and material of that upon which it dawns and reaches. There are those that receive all of the radiance of its rays, and those that do not, but only in part and partially – those that are not perfect recipients of the splendor of its rays.

Thus also the great light of our Christian Faith: the power is one and the same, but those who received and receive it are sometimes like gold and pearls, or gold and silver and gems; others are like brass and iron, others are like simple stones and dry logs. They welcome and accept the power of its radiance and enlightenment, but in the great house of the Church of God there are not only vessels of gold or silver, but also of wood and earthenware – there are some of honor and some of dishonor.⁹ Of those architects who built on this foundation,¹⁰ there are those who built with gold and silver and gems, and those with wood and hay and husks – whether the word is regarding the Faith or regarding the customs and manner thought of these.

And so that which is the foundation of the Faith is pure gold and valuable gems, as it is said. But the manners and customs and thoughts of men are not all the same, neither to the Faith nor to one another, but rather there are some among them like good soil, bearing the Faith thirty, or sixty, or a hundredfold, with bright rays of knowledge and glorious works of virtue. But in three ways, others among them lack in its way, with some of them resembling the seed that fell on the path, others that upon rocky soil, and others that sown among thorns.¹¹ And while the seed is one and the same which the Sower sowed, the soils and their characteristics, or the hearts and customs of these, are not all the same, not to one another and not to the true Faith.

⁶ Matthew 13:45-46.

⁷ Hebrews 12:2.

⁸ Matthew 5:14-16.

⁹ Romans 9:20-23; 2 Timothy 2:20-21.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:10-17.

¹¹ Matthew 13:3-9.

<Differing Concrete Expressions of Faith: Particular Examples>

In the very same way, it has been given to us that Holy Baptism is one and the same, that it was first perfected by our Lord in the qnoma of his humanity, and then handed on to his apostles when he said: “go out and make disciples of all the nations, and baptize them in the Name of the Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit.”¹² Then afterwards, men accepted baptism, and the greatness of the priesthood, and the Faith. Indeed, some of them accepted these things like good soil, and raised, enriched, and took care of them by the power of the Holy Spirit. Others accepted the seeds like evil and unjust earth – not only did they not take care of these things or raise them, but they betrayed them, reduced them, and changed them. Though the seed is one and the same in good and evil soil, its care and discipline are not the same.

Thus also Faith, baptism, and priesthood are the same between us and the Melkites and the Syrians, but their care and discipline and keeping are not the same between us and them. The pearl of Christianity is pure gold, and to us as well as to them it is there to find. But to us, that which is ours is kept gold, pearl, and unblemished Faith, without the grime, filth, or blasphemy of errors, I say, or additions. They, however, have the gold of Faith, but not without stain; and the pearl of the priesthood is found, but not without grime or the filth of blasphemy. Therefore, it is right for us to accept and to know that the gold of baptism and the pearl of priesthood is our possession. Let us then scour, wash, and cleanse the stain and filth of blasphemy, and throw them far away.

One indeed is the pearl of the unity of Divinity in three Qnome, and three Qnome in one Divinity, to us and to them. One also is the precious stone of baptism accomplished in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One also is the confession in the revelation of Divinity in our humanity. One also is the worship [to] the Cross and the East. One and the same is the Mystery of the Body and Blood of our Lord, which we accomplish for the forgiveness of our sins and the memorial of the death and resurrection of our Lord. We and they also accept both Testaments, the resurrection from the dead and life everlasting, the revelation of the glory of our great God and Life-Giver Jesus Christ, joy together and the judgment of justice. In this same likeness we all together look for and await. In all these and in others, we possess one and the same breath and mind. Regarding the Feasts of the Baptism, and the festivals of our salvation, however, we differ from one another.

<The Particular Case of Christology>

Regarding the explanation of the Union, I say, between the Divinity of Christ and his humanity, not regarding the Divinity of our Lord, nor his humanity, for all of us are together and as one [in these], and we glorify our Savior as perfect God and perfect man. Nor even regarding the Union is there conflict or dispute toward one another. Rather on the manner of this Union and its quality is there conflict and strife toward one another. For while we look correctly upon nature and the divine words and Scriptures, we confess a unity of will, and Person (*parsopayta*), and in-dwelling, and revelation in Christ. We

¹² Matthew 28:19.

explain this, first, from: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am pleased,”¹³ and from: “In him all fullness was pleased to dwell.”¹⁴ After this, from: “Behold my servant, in whom I am pleased, my beloved to which my soul is yearning.”¹⁵ Thus the unity is of good pleasure, and not in nature (*kyana*) or in *qnoma*. This good pleasure is revealed in the natures as well as the *qnomas* of the one Person (*parsopa*) of the Sonship and the unity collected, he who is one and the same, and is made known in Divinity as well as humanity. And so we call this same one the Person of the Sonship and the Union, and Messiah, and Jesus, and Son. And with these and like names, and of the Divinity as well as humanity, we have learned. That is us.

On the other hand, there are those among them who imagine and teach one *qnoma* from two natures, others one nature and one *qnoma* from Divinity and humanity, and who preach a bound up, or natural, or *qnomie*, unity, which places the Divine Nature under a yoke due to the *communicatio idiomatum*, which they believe and teach both wickedly and ignorantly. It has no proof in all the Scriptures, nor witness within nature. And thus we battle one another regarding the manner and quality of the union, and not only that but other blasphemies come up, such as God being born naturally from the virgin, or that God suffered or died, or such things. These are born from the disgrace of confession in natural or *qnomie* union of composition.

Because of this it is right for us to run and turn our faces away, as from a disfiguring and fatal disease of both body and soul. There is nothing in the entire Scriptures which resembles or agrees with this. Rather they have rust and grime on the denarius of the Faith, as we say, since the Faith is pure gold, which is stamped in the Kingly mint. For [it says] “Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom was born Jesus who is called the Christ”¹⁶ – it says Jesus Christ was born of Mary, not God or man. And, “the birth of Jesus Christ happened in this way: when Mary his mother was betrothed to Joseph;”¹⁷ here it says Mary is the mother of Jesus Christ, not mother of God or of man. And with Mary said to be the mother of Jesus, and not of God or of man, we learn from the holy Scriptures that Christ, and the Son, and Jesus, and the Son of Man, and our Lord, suffered, and was crucified, and was buried, but not God. It is gold filled with the rust and grime of blasphemy that says that God was born in the flesh, or that God suffered in the flesh and died. The Son of God was born in the flesh, Paul teaches,¹⁸ but not God or man alone. Christ suffered for us in the flesh, not God or man alone or separately. Thus we have accepted the pure gold and bright pearl of the Faith. Let us scour and cleanse and wash away the rust and filth of blasphemy, and toss it far away.

¹³ Matthew 3:17.

¹⁴ Colossians 1:19.

¹⁵ Isaiah 42:1; Matthew 12:18.

¹⁶ Matthew 1:16.

¹⁷ Matthew 1:18.

¹⁸ 1 Timothy 3:16.

<Other Religions>

Now because the old and new Jews have rejected the confession of the three adorable *Qnome* of God, we do not accept that about God which they confess. Though we accept God, we reject their denial of the three *Qnome*. In the same way also the Manichees and Marcionites: we accept together and praise a good God, but reject that of the evil and the just. We know, together and one and the same, the Just One, the Good One, and the Maker. Likewise, they treat and confess these things like we do, and we accept them and praise together. We know ours and theirs in general, but those things they have completed and confessed which are not like ours, they have confused and mixed up by their own will and their familial authority / own choice. These things we renounce, and send them far away from the courtyards of the catholic Church.

<Five Patriarchal Sees>

In the same way, though the treasury of the good and kind father was one and the same toward the older, I say, and toward the younger prodigal son,¹⁹ their care and providence were not one and the same. Thus also Christianity is one and the same in the East and the West, and the North and South. The care and responsibility of this is not one or the same to us the sons of the East and sons of the light, and to the other corners of the earth. Why indeed does the spring come out from Eden to water Paradise, and then divides afterward to four streams?²⁰ It is one spring into four streams, adding up and making five. The nature of water is one in all five of them; the quality and manner are one, and if you wish, as Deuteronomy and the Apostle Paul, the former adding to the four books of the Torah and the latter to the four Gospels, both of them completing and perfecting the number five.

<The Primacy of the See of Babylon>

Thus, like the spring of life and of immortality, Christianity sprung from us, the sons of the East, for it was from us that Christ was seen in the flesh, he who is God above all, and watered the paradise of all the world. As he watered the four Thrones and Chairs, and is one added to four, he perfects and completes the number five.

That Christ was seen in the flesh from us, we show thus. If Christ was seen in the flesh from David, and David is the son of Abraham,²¹ and Abraham is from us, the sons of the East,²² and is from the East, the conclusion is known and clear: Christ in the flesh is from the East and from the sons of the East. The Spring of Life, therefore, that is Christianity, was revealed and springs from the sons of the East, and from us was divided to the four streams, the whole Paradise of the catholic Church, which the Divine and Spiritual Spring of the Kingdom of Heaven waters.

¹⁹ Luke 15:11-32.

²⁰ Genesis 2:10-14.

²¹ Matthew 1:1.

²² Genesis 11:28-31; 15:7; Nehemiah 9:7; Judith 5:6-7.

Regarding natural priority and station, the spring was said to ascend firstly from Eden to water Paradise, and then afterwards the four streams divided from it, from which the whole world drinks physically. Thus also our Eastern Throne, from which the Spring of Life and of Paradise is seen to ascend first, I say, should keep the first and principal station. Those other four, from whom the whole world drinks as from a spiritual stream, it is fair to give the second place, and those after it. If Rome, because of the Apostle Peter, keeps the first and principal place, how much more reason for Seleucia-Ctesiphon because of the Lord of Peter?

And if the first place and station is due to those who before all confessed and believed in Christ, we also, the sons of the East, before all confessed and believed in Christ, and gave an open declaration of our faith, through our twelve ambassadors guided by the star, and the gifts we offered him: gold, as to the King of all kings and Lord of all lords, frankincense, as to him who is God over all, and myrrh, as foreshadowing the passion of his humanity on our behalf.²³ The conclusion is therefore known, that it is right and fair to grant the first See to the sons of the East.

Regarding the honor of the ends of the earth, the queen of all ends being the East, and if because of the crown by which Paradise was crowned, the type of Paradise on earth which is the Kingdom of Heaven, and if for the reason of the earthly crown and kingship, before all is made the kingly crown of Nimrod,²⁴ and if regarding the forefathers in the flesh of our Savior, in and from [the East] Abraham was born and came forth, and if regarding the primacy of our Faith before all in our Lord, when he was two years old we sent ambassadors and offerings for his Kingship, and at three years old before anyone else we confessed in his Lordship and adored his Divinity. The Romans indeed and the Greeks, insofar as they signified giving the primacy of the see of the sons of Persia, by all things being beaten and made to suffer by their hands – bitter sufferings and various trials.

<Five Patriarchal Sees Symbolically Justified>

That there are five Thrones is known in this way. The truth of the things of the flesh is an icon of the things of spirit. God, first of all, gave five books through Moses, thus also afterward God bestowed five books through the Apostles for the correction of the soul, through Matthew, I say, and Mark, and through Luke and John and Paul, that which even more is rightly called a Gospel, and so it is right to conclude that there are five books of the Gospels. Thus also the Sees should be, which may never accept subtraction or addition, neither an addition or subtraction of persons, nor of Sees. There is one and the same Spirit perfecting the catholic Church under the heavens, as by five senses of the body and soul, and as by the five books of the Old Law, and as by the five Gospels raising their voice of the kingdom of heaven, through those five Sees... [here the manuscript is cut off]

²³ Matthew 2:1-11.

²⁴ Genesis 10:8-12; 11:1-9.